

**THIS
PERMANENT
AND
GROWING
THEFT**

They dump trash in the ditch outside CITY_4.
This ditch is a wound carved in a giant woman's
cheek. A fallen giant of the war.

She is said to exude intoxicating fumes, either
from decomposition or the trash itself, and on the
net many people discuss this, with what degree of
sincerity I am incapable of gauging.

There are walls between this ditch and my
apartment. There are walls everywhere in CITY_4.
Some are fixed, others are always moving. They
overlap. No wall touches the ground. They are
suspended in the air by supports. The machines that
power them are installed in people's houses, like
the column of a water heater. During festivals they
are covered in chalk drawings, which melt to panes
of faded rainbow in the storms. In the commercial
district they defy chalking with decades of rain-
sloughed fliers thick as fur.

CITY_4 was only able to secure land rights
if it promised to use architectural plans generated
by a beloved and remote machine. This machine
dispatches plans every year through a decrepit, leaky
ink printer. The blotches and skids become part of
the schematic: minuscule stains grow into drooping
cafes, smudges melt the flesh from skyscrapers,
ghostly misprints become walls stuttering into the
distance.

I'm walking down STREET_12 and the sky

is GREY_MORNING_3. My legs move like normal human woman legs, making the sound of normal human woman footsteps.

Walking through the narrow space between two slow moving walls (one beige, the other pale green), I bump into my supervisor at the architectural department. The latest schematic is under her arm, stinking of hot electric ink spew. Her eyes change shape, aligning with the planes of her face as sound emerges from her throat.

“Why did you touch me? You have interrupted the thoughts I was having which I will only have this morning, which I will not have another morning, the thoughts I cannot remember but which I would have had if I continued to walk without interruption. I will never think those thoughts because there will never be an identical moment to the moment I was having before you interrupted me. The act of you standing there itself prolongs the absence of the thoughts I would be having in your absence. What can you do to repair this permanent and growing theft? Nothing. Now I will be consumed with the thought of how you interrupted my thoughts, and this will be replaced by another thought: the thought of how much time I’ve spent thinking about the thought of you interrupting my thoughts. This will be replaced by yet another thought: the thought of how much time I’ve spent thinking about the thought of how much time I’ve spent thinking about the thought of you interrupting my thoughts.”

She speaks rapidly and mechanically for several more minutes. I dissociate until she's gone, my brain tumbling like a stone into dark depthless waters. An old magic trick I learned as a child.



I see the glow of the ditch reflected, pink-green-purple, on the ridge of the GAIGA's eyebrow. Her ribs were broken¹ open by the onslaught of monster trucks, one of which is still in her left hand, metal squeezed like dough through her fingers.

I climb her graffiti cheekbone spattered with ballooning symbols and birdshit tags. Perched on her cheek, looking down into the glowing trash, I can think only one thing: This smell is disgusting to me. It is not intoxicating, only revolting. It's nothing like they said it would be on the net. I have come all this way, and risked my position at the architectural department, for this vomit?

1. She was driven insane, they said, that is why she attacked us. Her pilot suffocated inside her, the stoma chamber ruptured by a mass driver. Others say her pilot went insane and piloted her against us, screaming through her mouth. But people say many things.



Later, in a bathroom stall of the architectural department, I put on lilac deodorant to mask the smell. How frustrating it would be if I were mocked for something I didn't even enjoy.

I hear a sound like an animal. I leave the stall. The bathroom window is a tall pane of light at the end of the stalls. Like a slit someone cut in a piece of paper for viewing an eclipse.

I move down the stalls, slowly to silence the click of my heels, wondering if an animal somehow got in here, a vision of an animal rising majestically up an escalator, mysteriously granted access to every part of the building. Animals are attracted to waste, and surely have an intimate relationship with the toilets of this city.

I stop in front of a stall. Someone is crying inside. The sound makes my teeth hurt. It feels like broken glass.

Isidol emerges from the stall, her fingers poised for a moment on the sea green door. The difference between this Isidol and the sounds I heard, the bestial moans of despair, are as if she had been playing a tape recorder while sitting on the toilet. Her makeup is fresh, although her eyeliner is incompetent

as always. I wonder how she pisses. If she has to adjust herself down there. How she fits into all these clothes she's hiding behind.

She smiles, like a muscle clenching at electric shock. "Hi, how are you," she says, quickly and quietly.

We wash hands at opposite ends of the sink array. The pink liquid soap oozes through my fingers. I think of responding to her, but the moment has passed. She would think to herself, what a fool this person is, what is she talking about? She probably wouldn't even connect my cordial response to her previous greeting. She would look down on me for a situation that she had in fact set in motion. I feel so angry. I feel like I'm burning up. I'm sure tectonic flaws have appeared in my makeup, in the many layers I've had to apply today to compensate for the many incidents I've endured so far. Did she plan this? How could someone take pleasure in doing this to another human being?

She turns to leave. Her scrubbed palms glisten at me. She feels like jagged shards in my mind, bright hot like shurikens from the sun.

I place my hands around her wet wrists and squeeze. She stares at me. I focus on the fissure of her ruby lipstick. Freshly applied, it glistens bright as blood. The cartilage in her neck juts obscenely.

I squeeze until I imagine her hands popping off like rockets. Her mouth won't open, the fissure just gets tighter. Sometime later my hands fall away. Her wrists are purple. I can breathe again. The rushing sound which I formerly conflated with the unbearable pressure in my head is still there, somewhere outside me. My faucet is still on.

She turns the faucet off, her bruised wrist creasing with the twisting. Over her shoulder the window grows darker. There is a muffled thumping, as if it were being bombarded with fruit wrapped in velvet.

Bats crawl across the window, the bats that live in the alley. I look away, sick at the thought of their red eyes and unclean skin. Isidol's head turns with mine. We stare into the mirror. The background reflection is drowned out by harsh electric light, and in that glassy void our makeup is suspended like pale masks.



Sitting with the other interns, eating our hot pastries. Isidol is on her computer, hair pulled back in a ponytail, sequencing a song. For the past few months she's been talking about submitting an EP to a net label. She was fired from her last job, at a music news and criticism site for a large company.

Asta tells Isidol they don't publish many songs

like that, and we murmur agreement. I forget what kind of music she makes, but I'm sure it was like that. How arrogant to assume that out of all the people in THE_WORLD, she would be selected. Such arrogance is the most damning proof that her music is not worthwhile. The arts are an ethereal pursuit.

She says, "So who do you have to get raped by to get a song published around here, haha."

Everyone freezes.

I roll the pastry sludge around my mouth. This is a delicious pastry. I usually get them at the shop across from my apartment, but this time I went to the nice part of the walls, the well-oiled ones that don't make a sound, just silently shifting shade. I was going to get my usual, a chocolate scone, but there's something about berry, don't you think? A good pastry. I am enjoying it.



I'm on the 3rd floor, the one being remodeled, hiding in the plastic sheets and plaster dust. I'm crying at the thought of her telling someone about me touching her wrists. My tears burn down my face, I need to fix my makeup, I need to repair myself, she is breaking me, the rage and sadness is blinding me, she would bring instability to my life with her cruelty,

stupid stubbornness, she is making my workplace environment unsafe.

I calm myself down, saying to myself, who would she tell? She has no friends, just people she talks to on floronet. She has no family, she was not born here, no one else likes her at the department.

I rise up, slapping the dust from my skirt.



I am on the street outside work, waiting for the walls to change so I can get home. The forecast said the walls would be moving with reasonable speed and variation, but that simply hasn't been the case for the last five minutes. No path has presented itself, only glimpses of further barriers.

Once I was caught between partitions for several hours as children stared at me through a window and said things which I could not hear. Their house felt like some immense architectural vehicle piloted by parasitical organisms. I ignored them and ate leftover pastry from my purse. I was much more intentional about my movements from that day on.

Isidol's voice carries from the second story. It's like an old pipe or wiring problem by now. She is talking on the phone because the phone from work

is free. This private and unofficial task characterizes her at all moments--during work I can sense it building in her like a spring. This task seems to be the exhausting of every avenue of authority which governs the release of music.



I have forgotten my leftover lunch in the refrigerator. I climb two flights of stairs to the kitchen, and there I see Isidol on the other side of the window, standing on the balcony overlooking the alley. She is smoking. I have made no sound, but she turns and sees me, holding the wrapped kudzu sandwich.

She is talking to me, but I can't hear what she's saying through the glass. The corners of her lips turn upward. Is she smiling? I say "What?" then remember she can't hear me either. I go to the door and pull it open. The air of the alley rushes in, cold and fetid, carrying the white noise of the city like a river.

"What did you say to me?"

She says nothing now, as if I had passed through the door into an inverted universe.

"You were mocking me," I insist, surprised at my own courage.

She looks at the sandwich I am holding.

“You should eat your sandwich.”

She exits the balcony, somehow not touching me in the narrow space of the door I occupy, her body curving in the twitch of a second.

As her feet tread on the carpeted stairs, the chill air of the alley snakes past me as if following her.



I find the employee supervisor packing her briefcase. “Something happened...”

“What kind of thing?”

It seems I can only speak one word at a time, and my willpower is fading rapidly, so I speak the strongest word I can: “Isidol.”

“Oh.” She sits down, very serious looking in her angled black glasses and tightly pulled-back hair.

“Did something...inappropriate happen?”

“I felt, threatened, I...”

I have been taken further than I wanted, I feel exposed, it is ridiculous I would have to speak all the words to prove that she should be gone. I think back to the bathroom, the rape of her wrists against my hands. “There was touching...”

“I will look into it tomorrow, as soon as possible. I’m sorry we couldn’t address this during work hours. Do you feel safe coming to work tomorrow?”

“I think so, I will try.”

She gets up and shakes my hand. The bones on her face are rather large. I wonder if she is one of those women. But her expression is solemn and reassuring.

“I appreciate your honesty. You’re very brave.”

“Thank you.”



I’m eating fried pickles on the eastern wall. They’re dragging the limbs of the giant woman across the plain, toward the chasm. They crash into that dark like the toppling of stone trees.

They roll her eyeballs next, torn from her wrists by cranes. The sand sticks to them.

Her face is being hollowed out to make a reservoir. We've accepted a contract with CITY_7 to dump their trash there in exchange for angel grazing rights.



The next morning we come to work and Isidol is missing. Some say she must have taken the only bus out of town. Others say she jumped out the 4th-story window, into the narrow, fenced-off alley behind the building.

When it was sealed, the garbage left there rotted away until it became part of the alley, staining the concrete black. The surrounding buildings prevent sun from entering the alley, and any rain that threads through the gap of sky only changes the shape of the stains.

She left a note on her computer.

all artists are rapists and abusers

The supervisor says, “I wonder if maybe she was going to make such a big deal out of this, she could have taken the time for proper punctuation? Or at least provide some context for her decision? Or maybe she just didn’t value her own message enough.”

We box her computer and sell it.